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Learning In Between: Partnerships as Sites of Discovery

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Abstract

This article explores the benefits of one-to-one, undergraduate partnerships with public school students in teacher education courses. These partnerships, enacted through letter writing in paper notebooks and through a digital internship, involved teacher candidates communicating individually through writing and in product creations with public school students. The teacher educators unpack the discoveries they think enhanced the learning for teacher candidates including one-to-one teaching, asynchronous timing, authentic purpose, and coconstruction of knowledge. A goal of the partnerships was to make purposeful experiences for teacher candidates in the spaces between their own school experience and their future teacher selves; which is, in large part, the work of teacher education.

Learning In Between: Partnerships as Sites of Discovery

Teacher candidates start out in between. They are college students, practicum students, student teachers, and finally teachers. In the ordered progression of schooling we think of these as linear steps, yet the roles and expectations overlap and mingle. They create particular challenges to navigate. Even the past younger student self remains an aspect of identity that teacher candidates revisit. Making purposeful experiences for

teacher candidates in the spaces between their own school experience and their future teacher selves is, in large part, the work of teacher education.

Just as the marginal spaces between varied climates create biodiversity, the spaces between being a student and being a teacher are rich with possibility. What teacher candidates need to know (among literary themes, grammar rules, standards, & policies) is how to make connections in unexpected places, how to apply learning from one area to another, and how to develop self-awareness. Teacher candidates are students, and the work of becoming classroom leaders involves an intentional shift from the role of student to the role of teacher. A teacher candidate does not flip the switch from one to the other, but navigates in between in intentional and unintentional ways.

Simply having experiences in schools does not automatically generate insightful knowledge of people, systems, and self that teachers need to succeed in ever changing school settings. Studying educational theory informs practice only when applied, and writing partnerships, as alternative forms of field experience, provide a valuable means of developing knowledge of self and others in nuanced and meaningful ways (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007; Pope, Beal, Long, &

McCammon, 2011; Wilford, & Oberhauser, 2012). These partnerships, functioning in the space between student and teacher, are rich with opportunity. The partnerships benefit not only teacher candidates, but teacher partners and school students. This article focuses on the benefits of partnerships for teacher candidates who interact with middle schoolers through digital and notebook partnerships.

Background

We, Beth and Jenny, are former English teachers in secondary classroom settings. We transitioned, through varied career paths and further studies, into roles as teacher educators in small liberal arts teacher education programs. Recently, we became colleagues at the same institution and discovered that during our time in higher education we separately generated similar partnerships linking teacher education students to secondary school students through writing. Each of us was driven by concerns that teacher candidates needed more mediated and reflective interactions with students. We were, and remain, committed to the idea that teacher education programs strive to connect with schools in meaningful, reciprocal ways.

Both of us had experience with teacher education and secondary education partnerships as doctoral students. Beth, as the result of a writing tutorial field placement “falling through” at the last minute, innovated to develop a partnership between teacher education students in Methods of Teaching Writing and ninth grade students required

to retake English. The partnership was built on the collaborative and reciprocal concerns shared by Beth and the high school English teacher. Both were National Writing Project Teacher Consultants and participated in a teacher research group. That initial partnership was rich for all involved, and the discoveries and observations of that context led Beth to develop a similar partnership that functioned for five semesters, pairing teacher education students in Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum and Middle School Methods courses with 8th graders required to take a reading support class.

Jenny also experienced a partnership, specifically a digital internship that was embedded in a graduate teaching assistantship. The course was entitled Teaching Adolescent Readers and the partnership involved graduate students mentoring ninth graders on a poetry unit via a course wiki. In another course she cotaught, Teaching Composition, the graduate students mentored high school seniors on an Othello unit via a Ning. Both partnerships involved the same high school and teacher at a private school. Initially, Jenny suspected the private school setting was the source of success in the digital internship, and that a public school may not permit a digital internship for security reasons. Seven years later, after implementing a similar online partnership between undergraduate teacher education students and public school middle schoolers, she realized that the authentic interactions could come to fruition in a public school setting.

Beth's Letter Writing Partnership

Beth's first 8th grade-teacher candidate writing partnership emerged from a serendipitous conversation with a teacher that revealed shared desire to better connect students to resources in the community and to expand teaching and learning experiences beyond the limits of the classroom. The teacher, Margot, was teaching 8th graders required, due to standardized test scores, to take reading support. The class replaced what would otherwise be student selected electives, and the students enrolled were racially and linguistically diverse. Margot did not want students to experience the class as the punishment it seemed systematically poised to be. She also wanted students to see the possibility of college in their futures. She wanted to acknowledge, celebrate, and develop characteristics often marginalized at school. These efforts could be supported by teacher candidates. Margot's teaching interests and convictions about equity compelled her to take the extra steps a partnership requires.

Beth was working with a group of teacher candidates in a Middle School Methods course. The group was predominantly white with a pattern of easy success at school. She wanted them to look beyond stereotypes and assumptions about adolescents and middle school. She wanted them to see middle school from the perspective of students who were different than the teacher candidates. She wanted them to develop an assets-based view of individuals and school communities

of varied racial, linguistic, academic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Like Margot, Beth viewed teaching and learning as immersed in social systems with opportunity to increase equity. Their driving desires were a perfect fit for partnership, so they planned and launched a semester of letter writing between their students and between themselves.

The steps of the partnership, while outwardly simple, were complex. The gist is that paired students received a marble composition notebook and developed a pattern of sending letters back and forth. They launched the letter exchange with the teacher candidates meeting their partners at the middle school and wrapped it up with the middle schoolers visiting the college campus. Each visit included a campus tour, icebreaker activities, writing in notebooks, and food. The topics of letters ranged and included general introductions, interests and hobbies, family life, information about books read, and advice for future teachers and college students.

The experience of the first semester proved so successful toward the established goals that Beth and Margot decided to revise and continue the process. Compelling to each of them, professionally and personally, they repeated the process for five semesters. When Margot moved from that teaching role, she connected Beth with the new teacher who picked up the partnership seamlessly. Particular adaptations included transitioning the partnership to teacher candidates in

Reading and Writing across the Curriculum. This fostered more written exchange about books and writing. They also continued to tweak the prompts for letter writing to provide a general purpose from which partners could personalize their communication choices. They invited partners to include drawing, graphics, and collage. They considered online forums but decided to continue use of paper notebooks. Participating middle school teachers felt strongly about wanting students to write in notebooks, and teacher candidates and 8th graders reported that handwriting made the partnership distinct from other kinds of exchanges.

Each semester involved some trouble shooting, too. Sometimes teacher candidates were asked to be flexible and pair up as writers or to exchange letters with more than one partner. We managed issues of school cancellations and altered schedules by adjusting our swap dates. If teacher candidates were late in submitting letters, Beth would not deliver any notebooks until a letter was written to each 8th grader. Sometimes a middle schooler was absent for an extended time or the roster changed. Teacher candidates had to adapt to these classroom realities and navigate the spaces between teacher and student, speaker and writer.

Jenny's Digital Internship Partnership

Jenny's first partnership emerged in graduate school, and the partnership originated before she arrived on campus. Using the social

media platform, Twitter, an English teacher had tweeted her interest in finding a partner in higher education to collaborate on a unit with her high schoolers. The professor of record for Teaching Adolescent Readers and Teaching Composition responded to the tweet and a lasting partnership formed.

Jenny's current partnership launched in a similar way in her second year at her current college; the teacher contacted his alumni college's education program. Mark, a 7th grade social studies teacher, hoped to discuss blended learning, and a colleague of Jenny's connected them through email. After a brief email exchange, Jenny sent a calendar invite to Mark via Google Hangouts to discuss blended learning. During the meeting, Mark described his blended learning classroom, where students did part of their coursework online and part in small groups with teachers in the classroom. After conversing about blended learning, Jenny described her experience with digital internships. While Mark had not experienced a digital internship, they decided to embed one in his 1920's unit the following semester, giving plenty of time to plan. One video conference later, a new digital internship was in the works. Jenny sent Mark another Google Hangout calendar invite, this time leaving enough time in between for ideas to steep.

The first unit paired undergraduate teacher candidates in Educational Psychology with Mark's 7th grade students in a history class. Jenny hoped the digital internship would

provide teacher candidates with hands-on experience integrating technologies into a blended instruction experience that focused on enhancing student engagement, making learning more efficient, and increasing equity for K-12 learners.

After talking with the college's grant director regarding funds that may be available to support the digital internship, Jenny discovered that this new digital internship worked to further the college's efforts from an earlier grant to provide systematic training to teacher candidates on how to move beyond simple competency and familiarity with technological tools, into a thorough understanding of how to employ these tools to enhance student learning. Jenny learned that all of the funds from the 2011 grant were not used, and she was able to write a reproposal to use the remaining funds in 2016. Mark and Jenny began this first digital internship with goal setting. We aimed for teacher candidates to be challenged to contemplate how this process and these technologies might be used in their future practice to support the learning of K-12 students as they mentored the 7th graders in developing greater familiarity with: (a) critical thinking skills; (b) problem solving skills; (c) social skills - interaction on Google Slides; (d) persistence, (e) creativity, and (f) self-control. Teacher candidates faced these goals while developing knowledge of a U.S. History topic.

Each semester, Jenny housed the digital internship in her Educational Psychology course, but for Mark, the units changed as

did the class where the 7th grade digital internship was embedded. Depending on the number of students in the classes, teacher candidates mentored one student or more. As an asynchronous collaboration, students and teacher candidates had time to think, time to create, and time to provide careful feedback.

Values of Learning in Between

Our experiences with teacher candidates as writing partners demonstrated to each of us particular skills and understandings that we want to foster in teacher candidates. Our partnerships fostered such growth and awareness because they exist in the space in between institutions and between the roles of student and teacher. Specifically we noted that the partnership work generated positive results for teacher candidates because the projects involve:

- One-on-one teaching
- Asynchronous timing
- Authentic purpose
- Coconstruction of knowledge

The following sections present further exploration of functions, outcomes, and discoveries of these elements of the partnership work.

One-on-one teaching. Beth and Jenny deeply value the relational work of the teacher, especially as relational understanding can be the site of appreciating differences. Brown (2016) makes a particular case for the teaching of writing as a one-on-one

endeavor in which teachers resist bias and build trust. Beth and Jenny teach candidates to value relationship through readings and demonstration, but knowing about relationships and building them are not the same. The first step in relationship building is being open to the humanity of another. One outcome of the partnered relationships was humanizing school-based relationships, as one candidate noted, "I benefitted by just 'humanizing' middle schoolers. They have real feelings, hopes, and problems." Another noted that the partnership helped them to see middle schoolers as "more real and complex."

The digital internship provided healthy challenges while working with developing individual student writing and self-regulation skills in this mentorship experience. One student's reflection revealed the way many of the students felt: "Throughout this whole process I completely felt out of my comfort zone. I did not know the writing standards for seventh grade and so I was not sure if what I was saying was completely going over their heads, or if it was not enough. However, I think that is what made this experience so unique and helpful...being paired one on one with a student who is counting on us to help them succeed, really brings teaching to a whole new level of reality." This student's reflection is important because it shows the teacher candidate is challenged with real world teaching and learning and the importance of beginning with the learner and helping them move forward academically. This is also the teacher candidate doing the difficult work of relationship building.

Working with one student partner over time also allowed candidates to notice students who engaged minimally with writing or with school in general. Teacher candidates would have already learned through coursework that the relational foundations for learning must consider the strengths each student brings and build an asset-driven view of students, even students who may, for the moment be failing a class or having behavioral challenges. One of Beth's teacher candidates noted that her partner did not write much at all. Another noted that his partner's "whole life seem[ed] to be outside of school." This is a significant observation that the student's world is important, and the teacher needs to look for relational and connected ways to link home and school. Such insight is developed effectively by supporting one student over time, especially in written correspondence.

Asynchronous timing. These partnerships provided teacher candidates an exchange with students that did not happen in live time. Teacher candidates, still students themselves, need practice in discerning what to say and what not to say when responding to students. In the in between spaces of writing partnerships, as in the classroom, there is value in learning to expect the unexpected (DiPardo, Staley, Selland, Martin, & Gniewek, 2012). Beth and Jenny appreciated the response time that the asynchronous partnerships allowed.

Because Beth planned class time to read, discuss, and respond to partner letters, students shared their concerns. One ninth

grader wrote about discovering she was pregnant and lying to her mother about that. These are the complex details of students' lives that teachers encounter. In the context of the writing partners, we had time to consider the situation. Beth encouraged the teacher candidate to value the student and the risk she took in sharing the story. The teacher candidate was humbled by such personal sharing. She also noted that the work needed substantial conventional revision. We discussed how teachers both appreciate a student's story and respect the student as a writer with supportive critique. This would have been difficult, and quite likely less effective, if the teacher candidate had to respond on the spot.

In Jenny's digital internship, teacher candidates gave feedback to the 7th graders as they developed a product. The product varied (e.g. MLA annotated bibliography, radio broadcast script), but it was always created based on research from a topic of their choice within the unit. The asynchronous timing gave the teacher candidates time to study Mark's unit, and research the student's topic. For example, with the Industrialization Unit, the 7th graders signed up for a Robber Barron to research. While the 7th graders created the first draft of their MLA annotated bibliography, teacher candidates created a "research page" to familiarize themselves with 7th grader's chosen person. During the 1920s unit, students chose a topic to research during this time period; in this case the teacher candidates helped some of the 7th graders to narrow their topic (e.g. the movie industry,

washing machine ads, football). In cases where there was little information on a topic, the teacher candidates advised the students to change topics altogether. Point being, the asynchronous timing enabled teacher candidates to research the 7th grader's topic; create their "research page" with links and fast facts; help them be more confident when guiding the 7th graders.

The time lag also created space for Beth's students to determine the nuances of language and information that shape relational interactions. In the moment, teacher candidates might be dumbfounded by illegible handwriting, references to music and sports teams they did not follow, or questions about their romantic lives. The time in between letters allowed for informal research into sports teams and decision making about the boundaries of personal and professional life. While reading letters in class, we looked up soccer scores and played new music. Once Beth played a song rather loudly in a classroom in the library. A bit of "not school appropriate" lyrics made teacher candidates laugh uncomfortably, and then the group discussed how they might cope with such moments in their own classrooms and still connect by students sharing various interests. Such interests are the connections students and teachers make in the in between time.

Authentic purpose. Many sources (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Graham & Perin, 2007) remind English teachers that writers benefit from an audience that extends beyond the teacher and even beyond the

classroom. Writers in general craft their texts in more meaningful ways when writing for authentic purposes. The recipient of the teacher candidates' letter were also individuals to whom teacher candidates had a responsibility. As a teacher and mentor they were expected to lead and engage with their partner.

Initially, some teacher candidates reached out to their partners by aligning with them as fellow students. Early letters included statements like, "My teacher told me I should write to you..." Beth initially interpreted such statements as teacher candidates resisting their leadership role. Over time, it was clear that connecting with the audience of their partner in this way was strategic, a connection made through similarities in status as students. One teacher candidate's wish for a more engaged and motivated partner, created the space to explore, "How does one teach to students reluctant to engage?" In the writing partnership, teacher candidates practice, as they will as teachers, looking for new angles and connection points, even with a reticent partner.

Being responsible to their writing partners also meant that teacher candidates had to meet deadlines. Beth would not take a partial set of notebooks to the 8th grade partners, so any late work messed up the plan and left all partners waiting. Since Beth shuttled the notebooks to the middle school, a missed deadline resulted in a conference with Beth. One teacher candidate, in such a conference, highlighted how the writing partnership deadlines required a different

attention because of the waiting 8th graders. This teacher candidate didn't realize until the conference that writing a letter in a notebook needed to take priority over seemingly loftier assignments. The teacher candidate sat with that new idea for a moment and realized the degree of adjustment this required in his work habits. "All my school work before this was about me, me, me," he said. If he passed or failed, it only impacted him. The letters to 8th graders, like the work of the teacher, were different. If teacher candidates need to learn and practice this degree of looking at the value of their work beyond themselves, practicing it with one person in a dialogic letter notebook proved a rich way to discover this concept.

One way, over time, that Jenny improved the digital internship meant seizing the opportunity for the teacher candidates to create instructional videos. Teacher candidates come into the teacher education program having made plenty of videos, but, when asked one semester, only 1 in 50 of her students said they had made a video to teach someone how to do something. Recognizing the need, Jenny asked the instructional designer in the technology department at her school to visit her class and present on the various tools teacher candidates had free access to for creating instructional videos. Instructional videos play an increasing role in teaching and learning, and teacher candidates appreciated having an opportunity to practice this skill while creating something to assist and encourage their 7th grader. Teacher candidates created screencasts with voice over for how to do an

MLA bibliography. Another semester teacher candidates created “how to write a 1920’s radio broadcast script.” In the videos, Mark requested that the teacher candidates not only give instructions for content, but also encourage the students to do their best work.

Coconstruction of knowledge. We think of teaching and learning as two sides of the same coin. In the language of teacher education we link teacher and learner. It doesn’t matter how great the teaching is, if the learning is weak, the teaching is ineffective. The work of teaching and learning (and dialogic letter writing) must be coconstructed. Working as partners invites teacher candidates to not only lead but to learn with and from student partners as colearners and constructors of knowledge.

Guiding the student creation of products in Jenny’s digital internship meant honoring the student and the problem-based scenario the cooperating teacher had designed. When one teacher candidate perceived that her suggestions helped the 7th grader in advancing the student’s product, she expressed her enjoyment in beginning to step into the role of being a teacher. “I remember what it was like to be in 7th grade and I always looked up to upperclassmen and adults to help me with my work...I love helping others and being able to help these students with a creative assignment and see what they bring to the table really allowed me to step into the shoes of a teacher.” When teacher candidates scored their students

using the teacher-provided IB rubric, a mixed response of pride and disappointment came with evaluating their products. The teacher candidates sounded invested and wanted the 7th graders to score well.

Jenny’s classes coconstructed knowledge in a different manner when one semester Mark asked her classes to create a learning experience for their Westward Expansion Unit. Two different classes used Google slides and teams to break up the responsibilities to create a learning experience that was provided to the students with interactive slides (see Figure 1).

1. Go to the map and pick a state west of the Mississippi River during 1880. If you are having trouble finding a state, [this](#) is a list of states west of the Mississippi River.
2. Once you have picked a state, select a county from the map made of that state. If you have problems using the map and changing the dates the way you need, click [here](#). It will show you how to change years and select the thing you want to see — population density.
3. Then, find the population density (how many people per square mile) for 1890 for the county and the state that you have picked.
4. Lastly, pick a job that you would like to have. What would be a good job to have in the city and state that you have picked?

Figure 1. Part of the Westward Expansion learning experience created by college students for 7th graders.

As the partnership developed, Jenny and Mark realized the myriad of ways teacher candidates can coconstruct knowledge through project and problem based scenarios.

Beth’s writing partnership invited teacher candidates to share a notebook with students. Each wrote letters that generated a response. The collection required the involvement of each party in order to grow

into something larger than either could create alone. In coconstructing letters in a notebook, partners cocreated a dialogue in which each helped the other to see things in a new way. The partnership invited participants to learn in a shared space between their school settings, and to cocreate new ideas for their futures. Teacher candidates noted that their partners gained new insights for the possibilities of being a college student. And the middle school students helped to generate teacher candidates' future selves as teachers. Teacher candidates were grateful for this. One summed it up by saying that through the partnership "the possibility of being a middle school teacher has opened up for me."

Conclusion

Beth's reaction to the partnership experience echoes that of a teacher candidate, "YES! I loved this. The only thing I would suggest is more visits/writing." The process overall was generative in many ways, those described here and beyond. The writing notebooks themselves, in the context of higher education are a space in between past practices and current technology. They are a space between formal writing assignments and personal journaling.

Jenny has trouble imagining her class without the partnership. The digital internship creates the space to bridge theory and practice, allowing for a common language when learning about content of the development of the learner in Educational Psychology. When teacher candidates can apply strategies for providing specific

feedback and apply strategies for motivating learners in this one-to-one partnership, the classroom becomes dynamic.

It is true that we don't have long term data that allows us to report that these partnered experiences have lasting impact on teacher candidates' teaching and learning outcomes after they become teachers. It is also true that we appreciate the power of both writing and relationship as part of the school experience. We do observe that writing is a tool for building relationship and teaching in a meaningful one-to-one model (Brown, 2016). We observe that this partnered and digital internship writing demonstrates what Sincoff calls writing at relationship (2016).

We conclude that the shift to completing a series of assignments that are built on relationship and responsibility toward a student who needs support helps turn the attention of teacher candidates toward an understanding that their success is built in the way they support the learning and engagement of others, not only the value of their own good work. It also provides an experience in which outcomes and products are meaningfully coconstructed with students. The accomplishments of the partners could not be achieved alone.

We also advocate that in teacher education programs such partnerships be regarded as valuable forms of field work, practicum experiences during which we can coach and support from within teacher education. Our partnership efforts grew from asking questions and chance encounters. We continue, and invite you (see Appendix),

to be on the lookout for partnerships and opportunities in the in between places of your educational lives.

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Appendix

Planning a Writing Partnership

- Consider what groups or classes will work well as **partners**.
- Expect to take **time in class** to plan, reflect, and write.
- Be intentional in setting **goals and purposes**. Goals will be different for school setting and teacher education.
- **Teacher collaboration** is essential to the partnership. Expect and enjoy collaboration with your teacher partner.
- Establish a **regular pattern** of correspondence in advance. Do not feel bound to it.
- Consider an **online forum**, but don't assume it will be better. **Paper and pencil** offer a different style of interaction.
- Offer guidelines, but do not too heavily dictate the content of correspondence. Partners formed **their own styles** of interaction.
- **Vary the purposes** for writing mentorship. Include friendly conversation, coconstruction of a product, future goals, and discussion of reading and school.
- If partners have a common **language other than English** and interest in writing in that language, invite sections of their correspondence to be written in that language.
- Plan to **meet**. Meeting once at the start and once at the end worked well. Video-taping and webcams could be employed.
- Allow **as many exchanges as possible**—start early in the semester and go through the end. Participants wished they had more interaction.

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- Be **flexible** and respond to needs as they surface. (If numbers don't match, teacher education students can manage more students. If benchmark testing pops up, flex the due dates. If students move, assign another match.)
 - **Guide teacher candidates' reflective and analytic processes.** Coach toward assets-based appreciation of students and conversational style.

Beth is currently an Assistant Professor of Education at Bridgewater College and teaches secondary curriculum, instruction, and management courses. Past research focused on competing narratives of urban high school reform related to educational equity. Influenced by the National Writing Project, current research interests include the functions of historical narratives in educational communities, writing partnerships and identity development of beginning teachers. Beth earned her doctoral degree at Indiana University. Recent publications include a 2016 article "Young Adult Literature as Equal Opportunity or Privileged Engagement?" in Educating for Equity: A Forum of VA-NAME and a 2015 article "The Things We Carry: Artifactual Literacies in the English Classroom" in Virginia English Journal. 65 (4-11).

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